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**WHA Press Guidance
January 8, 2002**

VENEZUELA: INTIMIDATION

Question: Do you have any reaction to the recent intimidation by pro-Chávez supporters of opposition politicians and of Caracas daily *El Nacional*?

A: WE ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE EFFORTS OF CHAVEZ SUPPORTERS TO INTIMIDATE OPPOSITION POLITICIANS AND THE PRESS. WHILE DEMONSTRATIONS ARE PART OF ANY NORMAL DEMOCRATIC PROCESS, INTIMIDATION IS NOT. DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION AND A FREE PRESS ARE ESSENTIAL TO THE HEALTHY FUNCTIONING OF THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS. WE URGE ALL VENEZUELANS TO FOSTER THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS THROUGH CONSTRUCTIVE, PEACEFUL ENGAGEMENT AND TO REFRAIN FROM STATEMENTS AND ACTIONS THAT CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT CONDUCTIVE TO INTIMIDATION.

U.S. AMBASSADOR TO VENEZUELA DONNA HRINAK WILL VISIT *EL NACIONAL* TODAY.

[Background: Over the past several days, pro-Chávez supporters, goaded by Chávez's own rhetoric, have acted to intimidate opposition politicians. Previously, Chávez rhetorical intimidation has not resulted in overt acts of intimidation. Growing political conflict threatens the democratic process and stability in Venezuela.

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On Saturday, January 6, dozens of pro-Chávez demonstrators assaulted opposition lawmakers as they tried to leave Venezuela's National Assembly following a marathon session of heated debate that re-elected a Chávez ally to the presidency of the National Assembly. Hundreds of police deployed to contain the violence. Chávez called the violence a "warning" to the opposition and threatened to deploy supporters on "every street corner" to "defend the revolution."

On Monday, January 7, an estimated 100 pro-Chávez supporters besieged the offices of leading Caracas daily *El Nacional*. This demonstration came one day after President Chávez accused the paper of waging a propaganda war against his government, publishing lies, and exaggerating the opposition to his government. The demonstrators prevented newspaper employees from leaving the newspapers headquarters for several hours. National Guard troops successfully blocked the crowd from entering the newspapers' headquarters. A water canon was used to disperse the demonstrators.]

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